

“How Christmas Works”

Theme: Christmas Eve - 8:00 p.m.

Matthew 2:13-23



Christmas

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We all know about the shepherds and the angels and the wise men from the East. We're familiar with Joseph and Mary and the "little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay." These characters are known to us all, and our visions of them leave us with a warm, fuzzy feeling. But perhaps you suspect that there may be more than sweetness to this story. Yes, scratch the surface of any Christmas card image, and you're going to uncover greed and passion, danger and death.

So what is Christmas really all about? Just how does Christmas work? One place to begin to an-

swer that question is with the internet, which conveniently enough includes a site called "How Christmas Works." It's a one-stop shop for all your questions about the holiday. Questions like, "Why do people give each other gifts on Christmas Day?" or "Is December 25th really the day Jesus was born?" Then there's the mistletoe mystery. "What does it have to do with the Christmas story?" "And how about the 12 days of Christmas? What's that about? Aren't there really 30 days of Christmas, from Thanksgiving until Christmas Day?"

Of course there are answers to all these questions for those who are truly interested. The point is, a cultural and religious tradition like Christmas takes years, even centuries, of formation until it becomes the event it is today. Christmas works, and it works via these traditions and legends and customs that have evolved over time. They all help us "put on" Christmas. To do it right.

But how does this all work? And does it really work? Is there a lingering lasting effect that Christmas produces in us and for us? And could we throw a monkey wrench into the whole business that would cause Christmas not to work?

Actually, Christmas almost didn't happen. Dig beneath the peaceful picture of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, and you are going to find some surprises. Take a close look at the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and you'll be stunned by the danger and death that permeates the original Christmas story. No, Christmas should never have happened.

You don't for example, take your pregnant wife—nine months pregnant—put her on a mule,

and pack her off on a 120 mile road trip. Second, if you do, you arrange for lodging, and you don't just hope there will be a room in the inn. Third, the child is born in a manger. Not the most sterile environment to have a child—not your typical birthing center. Then there are the wise men who hit a roadblock as they attempt to gain access to Jesus. Sure, the star in the sky is a big help as they make their way to Jerusalem, but once they arrive in the capital city they run smack dab into King Herod, who is already making plans to find and to kill this new king. And tragically scores of male children are eventually killed by Herod in what today is known as the "Slaughter of the Innocents."

So Christmas almost didn't come off back then. But you know what, it often doesn't really come off for us either. Of course, we go through the motions. The presents, the Christmas cards, the shopping, the food, the parties, and so on. But that's not Christmas. That's the holidays. Like the wise men, we have to take a detour around these dangers. If we are going to gain access to Jesus, we are challenged to find another way. The wise men protected Jesus by evading the expectations and questions of Herod, and we should follow this same path. Our access to Jesus, may require eliminating some of the cultural expectations of Christmas that can block our experience of how Christmas really should work.

So how should Christmas work? First, it works when we remember that Christmas now, as then, is a dangerous business. It is dangerous because it evokes dreams and hopes. And when we dare to hope, Christmas can be costly. It can compel

us to put our hope to work, to give muscle to our aspirations and dreams. That's not always easy. It may require us to change ourselves, and it may require us to work to change the world. But if we do let hope infect us, Christmas works.

Secondly, Christmas works when we let Christ be at the center of our lives. When we shatter the false gods of materialism, and the idols of ambition, and the demons of self-importance, and set up the Christ child as the promise and priority of our lives, Christmas works. When Christ is at the center of our daily living, then the other demons will fade away. When we honor Christ, and not the culture of Christmas, as it were, then Christmas, ironically, really works.

Finally, Christmas works when we allow it to take us into the unknown. The Christmas story ends with the holy family fleeing into the foreign land of Egypt to protect the baby Jesus from King Herod's attempt to kill him. Jesus often leads us into unknown territory. If we are serious about following him, we will find ourselves in uncharted waters. But that's what Christmas is all about, letting Jesus take our hand and lead us along our journey.

The late Mike Yaconelli, told a story about a deacon in his church who wasn't deacon-ing. He just wasn't doing what he was supposed to do as a deacon. One day Mike said to the deacon, "I have a group of young people who are putting on a worship service once a month in a nursing home. Would you at least be willing to drive them to the nursing home?" The deacon agreed. The first

Sunday the deacon went to the nursing home, he sat in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and there was this old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man's hand and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month the same thing happened. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon. And the next month, and the next month, and the next.

Then the old man wasn't there. The deacon asked one of the aides and was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying and unconscious, but you can go down and be with him if you want to." The deacon went into the room and he took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man and bring him from this life into the next. As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks.

As he left the room he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." The deacon was confused and said, "What do you mean?" "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour.' He said, 'I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'"

Christmas works when we let Jesus take us into unfamiliar territory—a nursing home, a neighbor's home, or even into something like an attitude adjustment, or a generous spirit, or a helping hand. Whenever and wherever we go, we are the hand of Jesus to others, and when that happens—Christmas happens. Christmas really works! May it be so for each of us tonight and in the days ahead. Thanks be to God!! Amen.